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Real Estate Executive With Hand in Trump Projects Rose From Tangled Past

By CHARLES V. BAGLI

It is a classic tale of reinvention, American style.

Born in the Soviet Union in 1966, Felix H. Sater immigrated with his family to Brighton Beach when he was 8 years old. At 24 he was a successful Wall Street broker, at 27 he was in prison after a bloody bar fight, and at 32 he was accused of conspiring with the Mafia to launder money and defraud investors.

Along the way he became embroiled in a plan to buy antiaircraft missiles on the black market for the Central Intelligence Agency in either Russia or Afghanistan, depending on which of his former associates is telling the story.

But in recent years Mr. Sater has resurfaced with a slightly different name and a new business card identifying him as a real estate executive based on Fifth Avenue. And although he may not be a household name, one of the people he is doing business with is: Donald J. Trump.

Mr. Sater — who now goes by the name Satter — has been jetting to Denver, Phoenix, Fort Lauderdale, Fla., and elsewhere since 2003, promoting potential projects in partnership with Mr. Trump and others. In New York, the company Mr. Sater works for, Bayrock Group, is a partner in the Trump SoHo, a sleek, 46-story glass tower condominium hotel under construction on a newly fashionable section of Spring Street.

But much remains unknown about Mr. Sater, 41, and determining the truth about his past is a bit like unraveling the plot of a spy novel: Almost every character tells a different tale.

A federal complaint brought against him in a 1998 money laundering and stock manipulation case was filed in secret and remains under seal. A subsequent indictment in March 2000 stemming from the same investigation described Mr. Sater as an “unindicted co-conspirator” and a key figure in a \$40 million scheme involving 19 stockbrokers and organized crime figures from four Mafia families.

The indictment asserted that Mr. Sater helped create fraudulent stock brokerages that were used to defraud investors and launder money. Mr. Sater and his lawyer, Judd Burstein, repeatedly refused to discuss in detail his role in the stock scam.

But a onetime friend, Gennady Klotsman, who is known as Gene and who was accused with Mr. Sater as a co-conspirator, contends that they both pleaded guilty in 1998, and that Mr. Sater began cooperating with the authorities. Prosecutors are unwilling to discuss either the 1998 complaint or the 2000 indictment.

“I’m not proud of some of the things that happened in my 20s,” Mr. Sater said in an interview. “I am proud of the things I’m doing now.”

Mr. Sater, who has an untitled position at Bayrock, said he started spelling his name as Satter to “distance himself from a past” in an age when anyone can look up a name on Google. But he continues to use the name Sater on the deed to his house on Long Island.

Mr. Burstein added, “He does not hide his past, and difficulties he had, from anybody he does business with.”

But Alex Sapir, president of the Sapir Organization, a partner in Trump SoHo, said he was “not happy” to have just learned of Mr. Sater’s past on Thursday. “This is all news to me,” he said.

Mr. Trump also said he was surprised to learn of Mr. Sater’s past. “We never knew that,” he said of Mr. Sater. “We do as much of a background check as we can on the principals. I didn’t really know him very well.”

Mr. Trump said that most of his dealings with Bayrock had been with its founder, Tevfik Arif, and that his son Donald and his daughter Ivanka were playing active roles in managing the project. Neither Bayrock nor Mr. Trump has been accused of wrongdoing.

Mr. Sater has generally kept a low profile on the Trump projects, although he mingled with guests and the owners at the September party introducing Trump SoHo. Mr. Trump and Mr. Sater were also together in Loveland, Colo., in 2005, where they were interviewed by a reporter for The Rocky Mountain News about potential development deals in nearby Denver. Mr. Trump said he did not recall Mr. Sater’s being there.

“They seemed to get along just fine,” said Justin Henderson, a Denver developer who worked with Mr. Trump and Mr. Sater on an ultimately unsuccessful deal to build the tallest towers in Colorado. “It seemed that Mr. Trump relied heavily on Mr. Sater’s opinion on certain markets.”

Mr. Sater’s latest transformation could prove to be a cautionary tale for Mr. Trump, who has carefully molded his image into an international brand that has extended from real estate to bottled water, men’s suits, steaks, vodka, a television show and, in his latest invention, the Trump Hotel Collection.

The hotel collection, a hotel management company, includes two projects with Bayrock: Trump SoHo and Trump International Hotel and Tower in Fort Lauderdale. A third joint project, in Phoenix, is also in the works.

“Trump is a name associated with a certain cachet and bravado, I suppose, that will attract certain kinds of people,” said Rita Rodriguez, chief executive of the Brand Union, a corporate branding and identity agency.

“The brand is a strategic and financial asset,” she said. “It has to be taken care of very similarly to any other asset you have on your balance sheet. Anything that would detract from that could jeopardize the brand impression the brand makes.”

Mr. Sater was born in the Soviet Union, the son of Rachel and Mikhail Sater, according to public records, court testimony and the federal indictment. He has said his parents, who are Jewish, moved first to Israel, then to Baltimore and finally to New York in the early 1970s to escape “religious persecution.”

Mr. Sater was born Haim Felix Sater, but he once testified in court that he “Americanized” his name to Felix Henry Sater in the early 1990s.

Mr. Sater took classes at Pace University but dropped out at 18 to work at Bear Stearns. Like Mr. Klotsman, he rose quickly, moving from firm to firm selling stock.

Mr. Sater's first brush with the law came in 1991. Mr. Sater and Mr. Klotsman were at El Rio Grande, a Midtown watering hole, celebrating with a friend and eventual co-conspirator, Salvatore Lauria, who had just passed his stockbroker's exam.

Mr. Sater later told a judge that he was in a good mood, having made a quick \$3,000 in commissions that day. But he got into an argument with a commodities broker at the bar, and it quickly escalated. According to the trial transcript, Mr. Sater grabbed a large margarita glass, smashed it on the bar and plunged the stem into the right side of the broker's face. The man suffered nerve damage and required 110 stitches to close the laceration on his face.

"I got into a bar fight over a girl neither he nor I knew," Mr. Sater said in an interview. "My life spiraled out of control." Mr. Sater was convicted at trial in 1993, went to prison and was effectively barred from selling securities by the National Association of Securities Dealers.

But according to the 2000 federal indictment in the fraud case, Mr. Sater, Mr. Klotsman, Mr. Lauria and their partners gained control in 1993 of White Rock Partners, which later changed its name to State Street Capital Markets. Although the companies "held themselves out as legitimate brokerage firms," the indictment states, "they were in fact operated for the primary purpose of earning money through fraud involving the manipulation of the prices of securities."

The trio would secretly gain control of large blocks of stock and warrants in four companies through offshore accounts, the indictment said. In an illegal "pump and dump" scheme, they would inflate the value of the shares through under-the-table payoffs to brokers who sold the securities to unsuspecting investors by spreading false information about the companies. Brokers were prohibited from acting on sell orders from investors unless they found another buyer, the indictment said.

The partners would then sell large blocks of stock at a steep profit. Investors suffered substantial losses as share prices plummeted. Despite the prohibition against selling securities, a subsequent complaint by regulators at the N.A.S.D. recounted how Mr. Sater "cursed, yelled and screamed" at the firm's brokers in an attempt to motivate them. He also offered cash rewards to brokers who sold the largest block of house stocks.

At the same time, Mr. Sater, Mr. Lauria and others sought protection and help from members of the Mafia in resolving disputes with "pump and dump" firms operated by other organized crime groups. In 1995, for instance, Edward Garafola, a soldier in the Gambino crime family, sought to extort money from Mr. Sater. Mr. Sater, in turn, got Ernest Montevercchi, a soldier in the Genovese crime family, to persuade Mr. Garafola to back off, according to the indictment.

The denouement of Mr. Sater's career on Wall Street began in 1998 at a locker at a Manhattan Mini Storage in SoHo, where investigators discovered two pistols, a shotgun and a gym bag stuffed with a trove of documents outlining the money laundering scheme and offshore accounts of Mr. Sater and his partners. According to a law enforcement official, as well as Mr. Klotsman and another defendant in the case, Mr.

Sater had rented the locker and then neglected to pay the rent. Mr. Sater denied having anything to do with the locker or the guns.

At the time investigators opened the storage locker, Mr. Sater and Mr. Klotsman had gone to Russia, where their wheeling and dealing continued, they said. Their most interesting stories, however, are hard to assess.

Mr. Sater and Mr. Klotsman tried to cut a deal with the C.I.A., according to a book co-written by Mr. Lauria, "The Scorpion and the Frog: High Times and High Crimes." In exchange for leniency, the book said, they offered to buy a dozen missiles that Osama bin Laden had placed on the black market. The deal later collapsed.

Mr. Lauria has since renounced his book, which also details the false stock brokerage scheme, calling it largely a work of fiction. He even tried unsuccessfully to block publication. However, his co-author, David S. Barry, said he documented all the stories in the book with records and other interviews.

Mr. Klotsman said that Mr. Sater did obtain information for the United States about another set of black-market missiles, and that those efforts "bought Felix his freedom" from prison.

Mr. Sater, Mr. Klotsman and Mr. Lauria eventually returned to New York. Mr. Klotsman and Mr. Lauria agreed to cooperate with the United States attorney's office in Brooklyn and pleaded guilty to racketeering charges in connection with the fraudulent stock brokerages, other defendants and lawyers in Mr. Sater's case said. The information they provided helped prosecutors obtain guilty pleas from all 19 of their former cohorts, including six with ties to the mob.

Mr. Klotsman and his lawyer assert that Mr. Sater also pleaded guilty and cooperated. "Felix was one of the significant participants in the fraud," the lawyer, Alexi M. Schacht, said.

Mr. Klotsman, who grew up with Mr. Sater, now lives in a \$600-a-month apartment in Moscow. In an interview, he said he was paying the American government \$625 a month in restitution for the \$40 million lost by investors. He questioned whether Mr. Sater was paying a dime.

But Mr. Sater and his lawyer, Mr. Burstein, avoided many questions concerning his legal problems involving the Wall Street scam, including whether he pleaded guilty and cooperated. "I challenge you to find any official government document anywhere demonstrating his indictment or conviction for any crime other than the assault," Mr. Burstein said.

Mr. Sater said he joined Bayrock in 2003 at the urging of the company's founder, Mr. Arif. A neighbor of Mr. Sater's in Sands Point, on Long Island, Mr. Arif is a former economist for the Soviet government who built a chain of five luxury hotels in Turkey and Kazakhstan after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Within a stone's throw of the Manhattan Mini Storage building, the Trump SoHo is rising rapidly at the corner of Spring and Varick Streets, another new glass tower amid the somewhat grubby industrial buildings of what had been the city's printing district. The tower has generated opposition from some local residents and preservationists.

It is, for Mr. Sater, an emblem of his new life. "I'm trying to lead an exemplary existence," he said. "Old, bad luggage is not something anyone wants to remember."

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